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“Looking for the Color Behind the Color”: Jane Wilson, 1924 to 2015

by Rebecca Allan



Jane Wilson, *Time Change*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery.

Jane Wilson, who died January 13 aged 90, will be remembered for majestic, multilayered, shimmering paintings of land, sea and sky inspired by the coastal topography and weather of the East End of Long Island.

Her paintings are a testament to a lifelong engagement with the history and substance of painting, with its potential to simultaneously reflect the world and make a universe entirely of its own. Every inch of her canvases is oxygenated and alive, evoking the experience of sensing undercurrents beneath the surface of a still pond. In *Time*

Change (2011), for instance, Wilson's characteristic low horizon line anchors the canvas, and we can perceive what she described as "looking for the color behind the color." Suffused with horizontal bands of peach and pink of varying widths and delicate facture, the painting rewards us for attentive looking, revealing a range of overtones of scumbled color that pulsates and recedes. In paintings that "aim for moments of strong sensation," as she put it, Wilson belongs to a tradition of transcendental American landscape that includes Albert Pinkham Ryder, Martin Johnson Heade, and Joan Mitchell.

Born in 1924 on a family farm in Iowa, Wilson knew the sequences and consolations of a life lived close to the land. "Growing up on a farm...you lived at the bottom of a sea of weather," she told landscape historian Elizabeth Barlow Rogers. She attended the University of Iowa just as visiting artists such as Philip Guston were transforming the art department with the energy of the New York art world. In 1948, with an M.A. in painting, she married fellow student John Gruen, the writer and composer, and they moved to New York. Their daughter, Julia, was born 10 years later.



Jane Wilson in front her painting, *The Open Scene*, 1960. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art. Photograph by John Jonas Gruen, May 1960.

In 1952 Wilson became a founding member of the Hansa Gallery, one of several artist-run art galleries that opened in the early 1950s in New York City. Endowed with a striking, natural beauty that evoked Modigliani, and that endured to the end of her life, she supported herself as an artist by working as a fashion model. When a dealer told her that she wasn't handling her career properly by modeling, she responded, "Well, tell people about my years in academia."

Over the next several years she moved away from an early abstract style influenced by Gorky and others. "I found myself in one of those lucid moments that occurs every twenty years and I realized I wasn't a second generation Abstract Expressionist," she told writer Mimi Thompson. "I looked at the ingredients of what I was painting and felt an uncontrollable allegiance to subject matter, and to landscape in particular."

In 1960, when she joined Tibor de Nagy, the Museum of Modern Art acquired her painting *The Open Scene*. She and John bought an old carriage house with a hayloft in Water Mill, Long Island, where they found themselves at the fulcrum of a community of artists, composers, and writers. The mercurial ocean light and expansive terrain that had drawn such predecessors as Thomas Moran gave Wilson a mutable subject that she would address for the next forty years. The Water Mill house became a Long Island Rue de Fleurus — a spirited gathering place for some the most important artists and

intellectuals of the mid-20th century. A white wicker couch on the patio served as the set for Gruen's group portraits, whose lively subjects remind me of the civic officers in Frans Hals' banquet portraits — only tanned and happier — in their Lilly Pulitzer print sundresses and Ban-Lon polo shirts, holding cigarettes and iced beverages. John's photographs document the halcyon days of camaraderie among creative friends, lovers (and rivals) including Jane Freilicher and Joe Hazan, Leonard and Felicia Bernstein, Stella Adler, Fairfield and Anne Porter, Frank O'Hara, Cornelia and Lukas Foss, Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, Miriam Shapiro, and Paul Brach. For a while the two Janes painted together — facing each other, each doing her own work — in a bedroom in a rented house on Flying Point Road. Also born in 1924, Freilicher died the month prior to Wilson.

I love Wilson's deceptively simple titles; they are saturated with meaning, and never contain more than they need to. The titles have a sonic/rhythmic pulse as they play with figures of speech. *Call it a Day*, *Electric Midnight*, and *Torrid Day* signal movement, and sum up twenty-four hours of weather or demanding work in a few choice words.

I worked with Jane Wilson at the National Academy where she served as president from 1992-94 (she was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters). In 2011, at her first exhibition at DC Moore's downtown space (she had joined the gallery in 1999) I asked her how she felt about seeing her paintings in the bright halogen light of a Chelsea venue. Straightening her back at this question she said, "Well, Rebecca, your paintings have to stand up in any light!" Jane was genuinely interested in my own work and we talked about the challenge of painting things that were fleeting — atmosphere, for example. Now, whenever I pass the Pine Barrens on the Long Island Expressway and turn off at Manorville toward the Montauk Highway, it is forever a Jane Wilson sky.

Rebecca Allan is a painter. She will be the subject of a solo exhibition, *Fjord/Mountain/River*, at the Herron School of Art at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, April 3–29, 2015. She is represented by Patricia McGrath in Bridgehampton.

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